

“WHAT IS A JOURNALIST?”

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The question, “what is a journalist?”, then, is an understandable one. In my 30 years as a journalist and journalism educator, I have developed some definite ideas of what constitutes a journalist, although those notions are constantly being challenged by new technology and revolutionary thinking. First and foremost, a journalist is ethical. I list this first because I think it provides the foundation for everything we do as journalists. Yet, ethical behavior for journalists is difficult to define, and even more vexing in practice. For example, I spent five weeks in Uganda this summer teaching Peace and Development Journalism to radio journalists. As one of our assignments, we went to a primary school, and interviewed famine victims there. As I finished my interviews, I found myself reaching for my wallet to give some money to buy food, only to instinctively hesitate. Journalists must stay detached from their sources, right? But, what if these sources are literally starving? If I had given the victims money, I would have felt guilty, and wondered if the money, or the expectation of money, had somehow tainted the information they gave me. Did they tell me what I wanted to hear just to get some cash? If I did not give them money, then I would have also felt guilty. How could I leave hungry kids no money for food when just a few dollars could have fed them and their families for days? Easy ethical answers are often elusive. Despite these conundrums, there are a number of agreed-upon ethical principles that are useful for educating new journalists and guiding experienced ones. According to the Society for Professional Journalists (spj.org), these include:

1. **Seek Truth and Report It** “Journalists should be honest, fair and courageous in gathering, reporting and interpreting information.” Principles here include testing the accuracy of information, giving people a chance to respond to allegations of wrongdoing, and identifying sources, and questioning and exposing their motives. This also includes not plagiarizing, and not altering photos or video to change their meaning.
2. **Minimize Harm** “Ethical journalists treat sources, subjects and colleagues as human beings deserving of respect.” This means showing compassion for subjects, showing good taste, being cautious about naming crime victims, and respecting the right to a fair trial.

3. **Act Independently** “Journalists should be free of obligation to any interest other than the public's right to know.” To be independent, journalists should avoid conflicts of interest, and refuse gifts or anything else that could be perceived as influencing their objectivity.
4. **Be Accountable** “Journalists are accountable to their readers, listeners, viewers and each other.” This means that journalists should explain what they cover and how they cover it, engage in an ongoing dialogue with their audience, and “abide by the same high standards to which they hold others.”

Aside from ethics, there are several other elements that make a journalist a journalist. One of these is a recognition that a journalist's first obligation, first duty, is to their readers, listeners, and viewers. Sadly, in many countries, reporters and news outlets serve only their government masters, or bosses running political parties or special interests. When journalists serve their audience, they empower citizens with the knowledge they need to function as productive participants in a democratic society. Journalism.org, the Pew Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism, says it well: “While news organizations answer to many constituencies, including advertisers and shareholders, the journalists in those organizations must maintain allegiance to citizens and the larger public interest above any other if they are to provide the news without fear or favor. This commitment to citizens first is the basis of a news organization's credibility, the implied covenant that tells the audience the coverage is not slanted for friends or advertisers. Commitment to citizens also means journalism should present a representative picture of all constituent groups in society. Ignoring certain citizens has the effect of disenfranchising them. The theory underlying the modern news industry has been the belief that credibility builds a broad and loyal audience, and that economic success follows in turn. In that regard, the business people in a news organization also must nurture--not exploit--their allegiance to the audience ahead of other considerations.” (journalism.org)

An important element to emphasize here is representing all constituent groups in society. For too long, media in America ignored, or marginalized, minority groups, particularly African Americans. This has improved, though there is still room for more meaningful inclusiveness. Journalists recognize the importance of empowering all citizens, and of their role in helping to lay a foundation of tolerance, acceptance, and even brotherhood among different racial, ethnic, and religious groups.

In its guidelines for diversity reporting, the Pew Center recommends balancing visual images by seeking out those from different ethnic and religious backgrounds when photographing or shooting video. This is a good start. The diversity guidelines also offer a number of smart tips regarding reporting about Muslims, who are often misrepresented in Western media. “Do not represent Arab Americans and Muslims as monolithic groups. Avoid conveying the impression that all Arab Americans and Muslims wear traditional clothing,” Pew advises. Also, “Seek out and include Arabs and Arab Americans, Muslims, South Asians and men and women of Middle Eastern descent in all stories about the war, not just those about Arab and Muslim communities or racial profiling.” In addition, “When describing Islam, keep in mind there are large populations of Muslims around the world, including in Africa, Asia, Canada, Europe, India and the United States. Distinguish between various Muslim states; do not lump them together as in constructions such as ‘the fury of the Muslim world.’ ” (journalism.org) The diversity guidelines also wisely suggest integrating people of color, and women, into arts, business, military, and economics stories.

Finally, a true journalist is also a watchdog, an “independent monitor of power”, in the Pew Center’s words. In too many countries, the media serve only the powerful, rather than shining a spotlight on their corruption and incompetence or providing a voice to the powerless and marginalized. If media do not expose government malfeasance, then who will? If media do not air the grievances of the downtrodden, who will? It is no accident that indices measuring freedom of the press and those measuring good government often correlate so closely. Where the press is not free, governments are universally corrupt, incompetent, and sometimes brutal. So, when we consider the elements that create a journalist, ethics is the foundation, followed by a commitment first and foremost to serve their readers, listeners and viewers. Real journalists are committed to diversity reporting that serves all elements of society, and real journalists understand their role as watchdogs and advocates for better government. Regardless of whether they report for the *New York Times* or for a tiny website or blog with three readers, anyone who embodies these elements is a journalist in my book.

References and Notes

1. Society for Professional Journalists—www.spj.org
2. Pew Research Center Project for Excellence in Journalism—www.journalism.org

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If you're a doctor, or plumber, your job description is pretty clear. It used to be that way with journalists: if you wrote for a newspaper, or reported for a television or radio station, then you were a journalist. Now, with millions of bloggers, and thousands more citizens submitting their own photos and videos to news organizations, the lines are blurred. This is an issue explored in the article.